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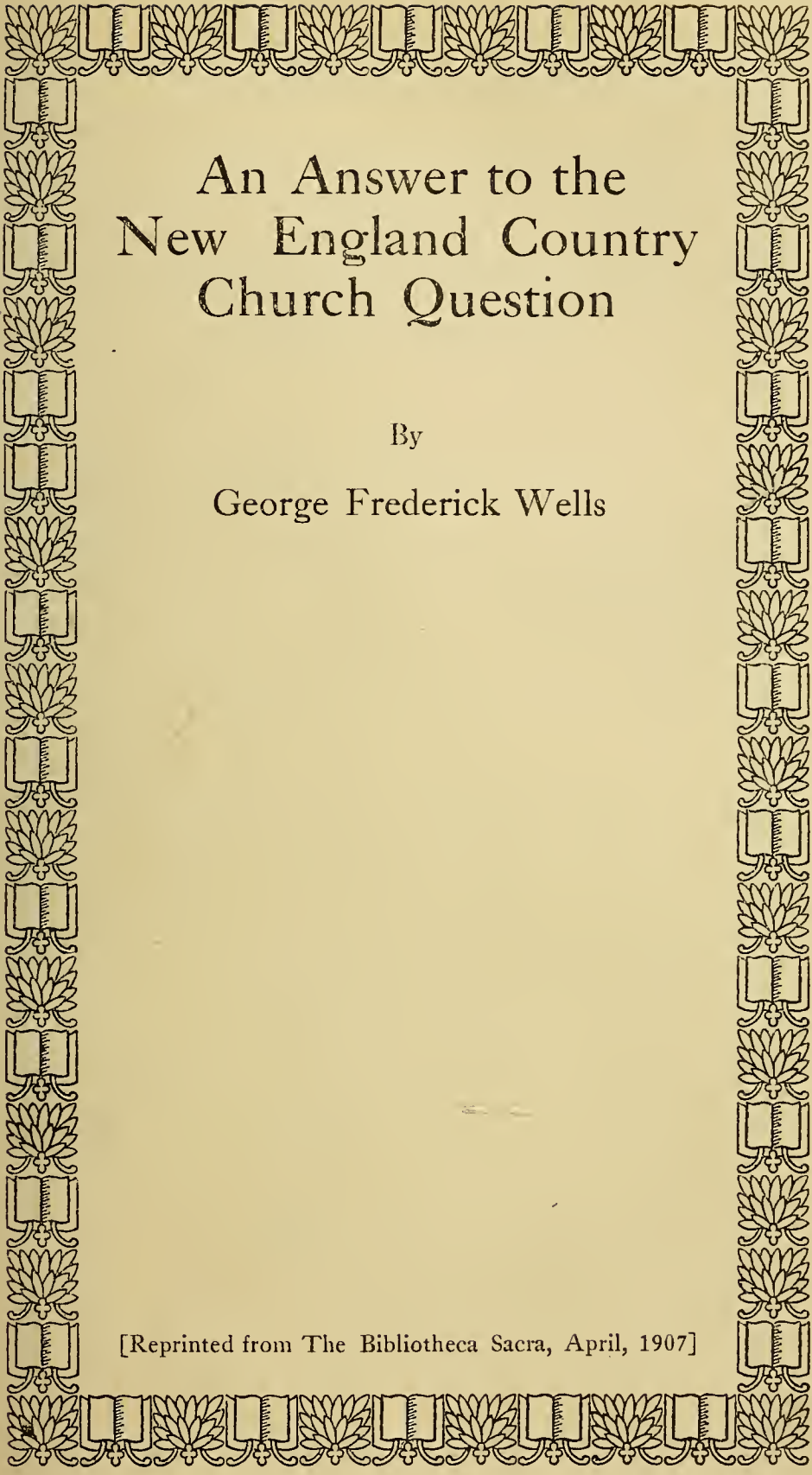
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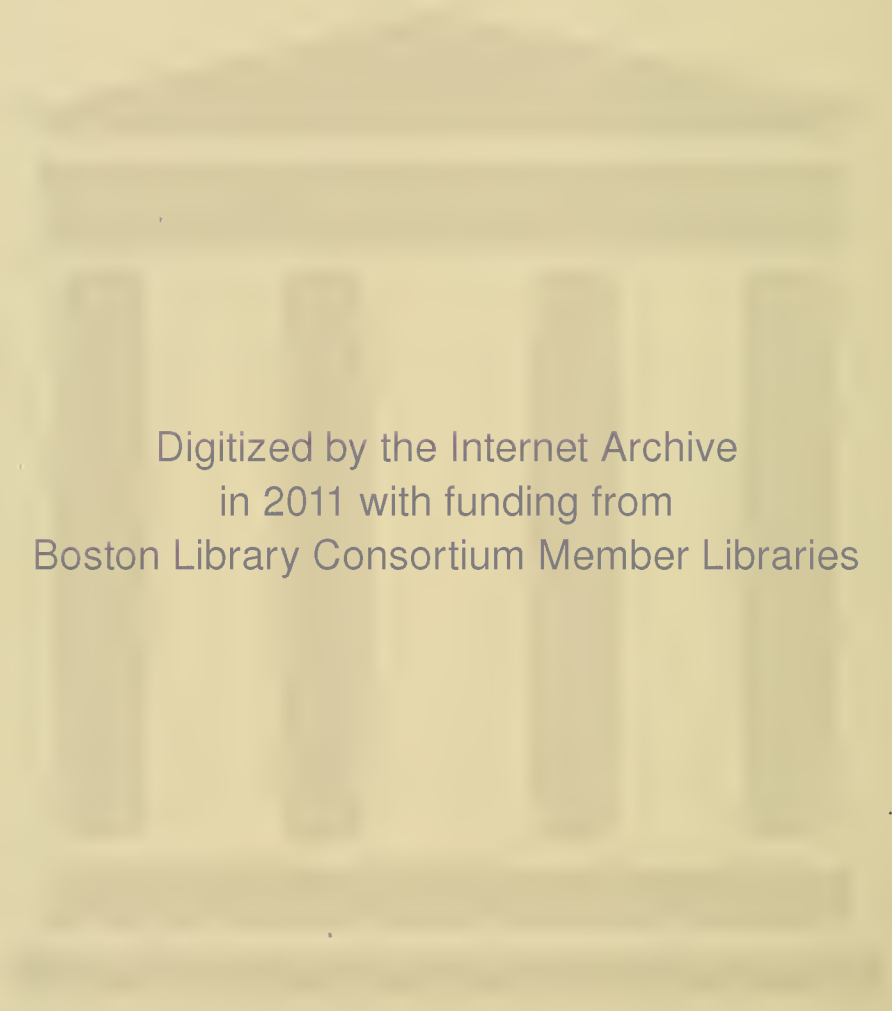


An Answer to the New England Country Church Question

By

George Frederick Wells

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ARTICLE VII.

AN ANSWER TO THE NEW ENGLAND COUNTRY
CHURCH QUESTION.

BY GEORGE FREDERICK WELLS:

THE first essential in the solution of the so-called problem of religious and moral decadence among the byways and hedges of what has been America's truest Utopia is a sufficiently broad, unbiased, and practical interpretation of all the facts and factors concerned. The purpose of a fresh discussion of the New England country church question is to present such an interpretation.

The strenuous and too often tragic experience of country churches in meeting the changed conditions and needs of our times is important, and many strong men have treated it in various ways. But in spite of this, and the wide-spread enterprise of social and religious workers, there is danger that, even yet, we may come short of success, because our standpoint of interpretation is too small and narrow, or because it is inconsistent with the facts of the field or with a true idea of the Christian church.

When we look at the expert work which has already been done in this field, whether it be evangelical or liberal in theology, revolutionary or constructive in design, scientific or fragmentary in form, we find that the mass of material properly related forms almost a distinct science in itself.

Rollin Lynde Hartt has been of great service in arousing interest in the situation as it has appeared to him. No more

scholarly man has pondered the problem than President De Witt Hyde, but his work is not yet fully appreciated. Dr. Samuel W. Dike has blazed the trail in a truly scientific manner, but he has called himself only a beginner. Pioneer statistical work of great merit has been done by Dr. Henry Fairbanks. Dr. Josiah Strong and Wilbert L. Anderson have made valuable contributions as interpreters of the industrial phases of the environment of our changing church life. The rapidly developing sciences of rural sociology and economics, under such men as President Kenyon L. Butterfield and Professor G. N. Lauman, promise to be of great help in the near future. It is devoutly to be hoped that the statistical work of the denominational home missionary societies and the Sunday-school associations, and the researches of the Young Men's Christian Association in country territories, are about to emerge into their scientific stage.

Before taking up the leading seemingly inadequate interpretations of the country church problem, the Christian church itself must be defined.

It is not enough to say that the Christian church is simply the social institution of the religious life: there are religious social institutions that are not churches. Neither is it always true that the most specialized social institutions of religion are Christian churches. It makes some difference what religion we are talking about. Scientific sociology may call the church that portion of the social constitution which seeks the ethical and religious betterment of men. This certainly would include the modern Christian church as we understand it. But it does not seem sufficiently to honor the Christian history of the particular institution which we commonly designate as the church.

Dr. Josiah Strong says that the rediscovery of the kingdom of God "as a new social ideal yet to be realized on the earth" has been very recent. Is it possible that the rediscovery, or perhaps the discovery, of the church has not yet taken place? Since we are careful to maintain neither sociological nor theological language or methods in any distinct way, let us be reminded that theology, though it recognizes the Christian church as something social, does not necessarily nor usually, if ever, give it a full status as a social institution. And, furthermore, is theology alone, limited as it is in stating the relations of social institutions to each other, or making clear the unfoldings of social forces, able to do justice to the modern church? On the other hand, is it possible for scientific sociology adequately to characterize the church of Christianity, if, for no other reason, because it has no language by which to designate the redemptional meaning for which the church, the guiding expression of Christianity, is expected to stand? Each science by itself at the present time seems to be inadequate. But the contributions of each are absolutely indispensable. The Christian church has its home in two worlds. It is more than poetry to call her a mother on earth and a bride in heaven. Thus we welcome the term "kingdom of God" in its largest Christian sense, because it enables us to centralize the meaning of the church, as, sociologically, the guiding star of "a social ideal yet to be realized on the earth," and, theologically, as the earthly institute of eternal redemption.

The Christian church, then, may be called *that specialized part of the organized expression of the kingdom of God among men which embodies and promulgates the distinctly ethical and religious aspects of the kingdom.*

It is regretted that in this article we cannot give in a detailed form the body of facts from the field upon the basis of which the present larger interpretation of the country church problem has been worked out. So, without further elaboration of the idea of the church, and without defending this idea,—for the practical conditions in the case seem to substantiate it,—the interpretation itself will be given upon the background of the four leading partial but preliminary interpretations. These usual theories are evident enough from the classes of work that are being done, and also from the literature of this subject. The logic of practical necessity will be followed as to the order of these theories, beginning with those that are most prominent as theories and leading to those of greater practical importance.

I.

Can any one be blamed for thinking that the New England country church question is one of theological dogmas or sectarian creeds? Who can criticise the theologian who thinks that he, unassisted, is able to prescribe for the solution of the problem? But the theological interpretation of the country church problem taken alone is insufficient, as we shall see. The greatest error of interpretation is apt to occur right here.

I am well aware that the page of New England history has been much marked by the footprints of creeds and dogmas. It is true that that noble Pilgrim band which landed on Plymouth Rock nearly three centuries ago was impelled and empowered by the one desire to find a home for a new belief. I believe with gladness that the early New England parish had to be ruled by the supremacy of things mystical and dogmatic in order to become the cradle of American freedom, the nursery of our finest literature, and the parent of both

America's political and educational systems. I grant that the controversy from the days of Freeman, Ware, and Channing which has stirred New England thought through and through, and the echo of which has been heard around the world, was centered about the greatest doctrines of all theology. I am proud that New England, principally because her strict adherence to strong types of theology had so completely tempered her life, has surpassed other sections of the republic in producing America's superb manhood, and those missionary movements that are to-day engirdling the world with religious light and power. Nevertheless the New England question is not entirely theological.

New England to-day is especially known as the home in America of the so-called liberal movement in theology. The great mission of the liberal theology at first was to displace the sternness of Calvinism, and later it has tried to socialize the great denominations. Her aim has not been to devitalize religious beliefs, but rather to make them more practical and powerful; to make them more human, and thus more divine. In performing her mission she has taught the denominations the invaluable lesson that they have a social problem. The day will come when hardly a greater tribute of praise will be given to New England than for her leadership in socializing the modern church through her liberal movement.

But there are two sides to this matter of liberal theology, and one without the other does not represent my view.

From the fact that this New England liberal movement places so strong emphasis upon education, the philosophies, and humanitarian types of reform, it may be called essentially sociological. There is danger lest sociology be allowed to take the place of theology, or that the goal of our thought extend hardly higher than a human level. The sciences of

things seen must never be permitted to crowd out the truths of vision and of faith. A sociology can never take the place of a theology, however unsocial the latter may be. What we are now getting, in the evangelical and missionary movements of the present day, is a theology socialized—the things of faith humanly taught and lived. While the liberal movement—along with the Young Men's Christian Association, the Salvation Army, the institutional saloon, and similar movements—has effectively reminded the denominations that they have a duty to society, and hence a social problem, she has not taught them how to solve it. A grievance is not a propaganda. The danger, if not already the guilt, of the liberal movement, because of a too persistent emphasis, is that of not becoming a part of the socialized church she has helped to nurture, and thus of becoming ineffective as a mere sociology.

So the New England country church question is seen to have a humanitarian or social dimension, and is therefore not entirely theological. If the problem of the Christian church were one of theology alone, what could the church itself be but some artificial mechanism of thought operated by theological creed-power?

II.

The next most usual error of students of rural problems is to overemphasize the economic interpretation of the question. This mistake, as is the case with the exaggeration of theology, is essentially academic. Nevertheless it has its practical bearing of fundamental importance.

Political economy, in its scientific application, seems insufficient for entirely explaining the changed conditions of modern society that affect country churches. At best it is only a part truth to call industrialism the *cause* of all recent prog-

ress. Dr. Josiah Strong says so much about the typical instrument of industrialism that we might almost call him the father of the steam-engine theory of social interpretation. One would think from statements like the following that he was inclined to give too large a place to industrialism. He says: "We must not be surprised that the industrial revolution of the past century has produced and is producing a new civilization." Mr. Wilbert L. Anderson, in the *Country Town*, seems to place a similar emphasis. In speaking of the growing cities, he says: "That this phenomenal development during the last hundred years is due to industrial causes . . . is sufficiently evident" (p. 35).

It is not difficult at this point to get things into their right relations. Edward Pearson Pressay is helpful in saying, "Commercial ideals, and not commerce and manufacturing by steam, have wrought the quality of change." It is quite possible that the steam-engine and modern social progress have a common cause lying a little farther back. The renaissance of learning, with its discovery of a new world and its religious reformation, preceded James Watt and the rise of industrialism.

And then we must not forget that the explanation of a part, however important it may be, cannot make clear the whole. Professor Seligman well says that "the economic life does not constitute the whole of social life."

That the economic interpretation has its limitations is evident from one concrete example. The following instance has so many counterparts in New England that no apology is necessary for its use here.

A count has recently been made of the number of houses, both occupied dwellings and vacant, in a single country village in the lower valley of the Sacandaga River near Sara-

toga, New York. In this once prosperous village there is now one struggling church unable to have a local pastor, two churches with closed doors, and within a mile of the village two other churches in which there is no preaching. The village has fifty-eight houses, some of them large enough for three or four families, fifteen of which were unoccupied three years ago, and now thirty, or more than fifty per cent of them, are vacant and lonely. But the community as a whole, of which the village was only a part, was essentially agricultural and composed largely of farmers. It lost its factory folk when a local factory closed, and most of them moved down the valley to the banks of the Hudson to work in one of the largest paper-mills in the world.

The loss of the factory workers in this case was, of course, due to the centralization of industry. But if the churches, by power of spiritual life and leadership in social life, had done more, and by excessive sectarianism and personal autocracy had done less, the community to-day would not be suffering an almost total lapse from essential Christianity. Its ethical history cannot be read in the terms of industrial changes alone. However much the Christian church may or may not be the creation of economic interests, considered in their last and highest analysis, she is not the helpless offspring nor the menial slave of industrial caprice or power.

III.

In the third place, we come to the religious interpretation. This theory is held by very many of those who are engaged in the practical solution of the country church problem.

These workers are missionaries as truly as those found in city slums or foreign fields. To them individually the chief concern of life is worship, religious instruction, faith in God,

love for his creatures, personal consecration to the point of devotion, joy in the Christ of redemption, spiritual vision and ambition that seeks the life of God consciously and continually abiding in men, and the conversion of the whole world.

To them as missionaries the problem of the church is the call for religion, more religion, a deepening and extension of spiritual living. To them the evangelical revival, continuous rather than spasmodic, but the revival nevertheless, is the usual prescription for dead churches, and communities morally lapsed. To them if the simple gospel may be preached in evangelical terms,—the gospel of Sabbath rest and worship, the gospel of sins forgiven and lives transformed, the gospel of benevolence and service, and the gospel of purity and temperance,—then the whole lump of society will be leavened and the reign of peace will surely come.

Not long ago a missionary from the slums of a large city came to be the pastor of a decadent New England country church. It was prophesied that that church must dismiss its minister and close its doors inside of five years. The older members were dying and the young people were going to the cities. Its clergy had been irregular and inefficient. Church quarrels had been the cause of several empty pews. Though it was the only church in the community, sectarianism of a certain sort was rife between the contending factions, under the leadership of the ever-present church autocrats. Church finances were slow and tedious. A good-natured type of commercialism was not the least blessing and curse which the church enjoyed. The church was lonely, from its suburban location, the market, railroad, post-office, school, and the lodges all being in a near-by town of increasing importance. Above all, the people did not believe in the church.

When the evangelistic pastor was well started in his new field he was asked: "Do you not get lonesome in your work? Do you not sometimes feel that, as far as reaching the community outside of the church is concerned, the church and your work might as well be forty miles away? Does the church engine, however well it is fired, draw the community train?" After several months of experiment the pastor replied: "I am sounding the evangelistic note because I believe in it. Our church is growing. We are reaching the whole community by the new way of the old gospel. We have no trouble to get money. My salary a good share of the time is overpaid. Our winter congregation is larger than is usual for summer. We have bought a new organ and paid for it. We will give over fifty dollars for missions, and quite as much for other causes. Sunday-school attendance is, on the average, twelve above any previous record I can find."

This instance stands as a triumph for the religious interpretation. But a question is sure to arise. Will it be lasting? Since the work is genuine and under strong leadership, we cannot help but answer, Yes, as long as the present balance of methods and forces continues. There is evidence that the social and intellectual requirements are wisely met by the community. After all, the supremacy of spiritual religion has too largely departed from the churches, and, until it is restored, the churches, whatever else they may or may not have, will be suffering their greatest possible loss. "This ought ye to have done without leaving the other undone."

The limitations of the religious interpretation must be stated. Let them first be suggested by an actual instance.

Six summers ago there was a revival of the D. L. Moody type in a New England mountain town of less than 800 inhabitants. About eighty conversions resulted. The revival

was remarkable in faith, for it was the first of the kind that the town had ever had. The churches had been discordant, and the leading church, by a quarrelsome chapter of a secret order, had been allotted but one more year of lingering existence. The revival was remarkable also in works. It had power to heal family and personal feuds, to help the churches to useful coöperation, to transform some desperate characters, and to create a new atmosphere of religious and social life. Strong devotional life and vigorous and wise personal leadership were manifested, and the work flourished for a time. But something was soon lacking. What are the conditions now? It is reported that less than one-fourth of the population ever attend any one of the three churches; that in the community there are at least twenty women of immoral character; that there is so much inter-church strife that there is no time for other church quarrels; the highest ambition of the average boy is to have a gun, a dog, a horse, and to live in the woods; and irreligion and vice are on the increase.

What was lacking? The community needed sufficient moral force in its citizens, so that organized temptation might be eliminated, ethical strength in the churches to unite the working religious forces, more healthy social enjoyment, a higher educational standard as an intellectual and moral incentive for the people, and more association with the big world to give the young people ambition for large and useful living. These not already existing, the church should do its part in securing them. How could a revival of devotional religion supply all of these conditions? Yet all these, and perhaps others, are necessary for successful church life in this community.

The limitations of the religious interpretation of the country church question lie in the facts that country churches cannot live apart from their environment, and that religion, however

effective it is in its right relations, cannot respond to all of the demands of the human personality nor fulfil all the aspects of the kingdom of God developing among men. Life is more than a continued prayer-meeting, ending only when men sing themselves away to everlasting bliss.

IV.

In the fourth place, we come to what is commonly called the social problem of the church and its solution by social methods.

A church may be said to have a theological problem when its creeds or teachings are not in harmony with the highest Christian conceptions of truth, to have an economic problem when industrial changes rob the church of its people and means of support, and to have a religious problem when faith is weak and worship is not respected. Theology, religion, and economics alike recognize that the church has a social problem in the large sense that she has a duty in behalf of society. This, however, is not what we mean by the social problem of the church.

But when churches are found to be out of balance from a lack of social life in themselves, unfruitful in spiritual results from a lack of social adjustment to surroundings, or deficient or dying because of an unfavorable social environment; and when these difficulties can be removed by a revival in these churches of purely social interests, by a use of social agencies in securing for the church a proper relation to the world, or by getting into a favorable environment,—then may the church be said to have a social problem that demands a social interpretation. Thus we secure a distinctly social standpoint for both study and effort.

There is, indeed, at the present time, much need of em-

phasis upon the practical social problems of country as well as of city churches.

Sectarianism, or the clash in the same communities between different denominations, is certainly a social difficulty, since it can be shown that the sectarianism of social castes or grades as represented in the churches is greater than that caused by difference of creed or belief. And the misfortunes brought about by the industrial readjustments of communities so that society demands of the church the temporary performance of the usual functions of the home, school, civil, and commercial institutions, also burden the church with special social duties, and place before her choice opportunities of service.

Such conditions, which call for church federation and institutionalism,—using these terms in their technical sense,—sufficiently illustrate this phase of the question. The social interpretation of the country church problem might further be indicated, but its mere definition and illustration, in view of the preceding discussions, is enough to indicate both its value and its limitations. It is evident that some country churches need the work of social specialists, but others have needs which cannot be supplied by social forms of effort alone. A church of the kingdom is always more than a social club.

After all, we come to the one declaration that the problem of the New England country church is the problem of the kingdom of God at its highest ethical and religious altitude, and the way to it.

We have found no other adequate standpoint from which to define the modern Christian church in its local sense. And from no other standpoint can the country church question find a satisfactory answer.

There is need of further analysis and application: first, in a technical manner, and then practically.

The attempt has been made to find an eclectic or all-comprehensive science, which, as a science, will take account of all the conditions and factors involved in the churches, whether these factors be theological, religious, industrial, social, or otherwise, and translate them into the terms of one common measure. Such a science, it would seem, would meet the technical needs of our present situation.

I believe that the science of social economy in its application to rural life is just what we have so long desired. Economics deals with the "adjustment of life to the wherewithal of life." In a primary sense this science, as we now seek to use it, treats of the adjustment of natural or physical resources to the needs of rural society. But in a secondary, yet true, if not necessary, application, it may consider the intellectual and spiritual wants of men. This would be true for those higher wants which are satisfied by æsthetic, moral, or religious values that have their equivalents in material things, or manifest themselves in social customs and forms. The question "What would real estate be worth in Sodom?" indicates that organized religious life has a direct bearing in the economic life. The statistics of church membership and attendance, church property and expenses, and other similar facts of status, are a reliable measure of the price which is placed upon the particular values for which the church stands.

Or, if we look at the same thing from the subjective rather than from the objective side, we may utilize the science of Christian ethics, in which statistics are inductively applied to the existing conditions of the field, as the one adequate interpretation of the needs, forms, and forces of organized rural Christianity. This is seen to be practicable, since the moral

consideration is so absolutely ubiquitous in everything that concerns the country church, whether it be the matter of social environment molded by industrial conditions, the integrity of theological standards, or the vitality of religious experience.

But all this needs to be held in the light and experience of the great living ideal which we would realize for the world in the completed kingdom of God. An eclectic science implies the existence and use of other sciences. Thus we get not a mere science, nor a group of related sciences, but a whole kingdom of vital truth. If all the glory of the nations is to be brought into the New Jerusalem of the church triumphant, why are not the treasures of all the sciences, and all the beauties of character and life as well, to be held for service and embodied in every church, rural or urban, that the sun shines upon?

In looking at the problem of the country churches from the practical standpoint, we find that the eclecticism of the kingdom of God, as represented in the Christian use of rural economics or practical ethics, is both real and true.

To the students of the kingdom such an interpretation, and only such, covers the field.

When one seeks a method by which he can adequately study the conditions of rural religious life, there are several things he must take into account. He must determine the relative worth of creeds, of which there are the authoritative or dogmatic, the evangelical or vital, the liberal or humanitarian, and the spiritistic. Of church governments he must consider the autonomous, the episcopal, the presbyterial. He must weigh the power of the different ministerial types, such as the priestly, the homiletic, the social, the pedagogic, the evangelistic, and so forth. The economic, educational, and moral conditions of communities must be studied, so that the churches

can be classified according to social environment. A neglected element in the study of religious problems is that of the *genius loci* of churches. For what does each church stand? Is it for the kingdom of God in a large way, or only for a small phase of it? Some churches stand for character in all its breadth and power, others for intellectuality, æstheticism, moral energy, respectability or social selection, sociability or social enjoyment, emotionalism or religious enjoyment, traditionalism, sectarian pride, and other qualities more or less worthy. Special research needs to be made of the social policies of the church; such as, evangelism, or the propagandism of the religious interests of the church; federation, or the uniting of formal forces to promote life; institutionalism, or the church doing the work of secular institutions by substitution; and coöperation, or the church working with other institutions, religious or secular, for total social welfare. And then the religious societies within the churches, such as Sunday-schools, young peoples' societies, and missionary societies, must be definitely investigated. Surely no one science alone is sufficient for the treatment of so many and diverse interests.

But the best elaboration of the larger view must express itself through the men of the kingdom. When the message of the truer interpretation is more generally received, the workers will be spared from meager adaptations and small success.

When that time comes, not even successful church federation workers will say of that method: "We think it is the only way to solve the country church problem." How could federation help a community with one church, and that dying for evangelism? "I had come to the settled belief," confesses one social worker, "that institutional methods generally applied were the only salvation for the church in this age."

Institutional methods are always a curse when they seek to do work that the home or other secular but right agencies can do as well. How many ministers are preaching the second commandment to the church in behalf of the world, when the church itself is dead for the need of the first! No stream can rise higher than its source. Though no church in an unsaved community is safe without evangelism, yet evangelism alone can never conquer the planet for Christ. Many a revival has failed because the church has stood for the salvation of the soul, but not for that of the life. A man must find through the church the home for his life if he would find in the Christ the home of his soul. More churches have been killed by theology and preaching than by life and righteousness, but the four in harmony are necessary for solving the problems of duty and love, of thought and conduct. And thus shall the kingdom come.

The problems of the country churches in New England are theological and religious, ethical, economic and social, in different degrees, at different times and places; but they are the problems of the kingdom always and everywhere. I believe that every case of misfortune and sin can be met by careful diagnosis and prescription, limited only by the passing of time and the human will, so that every community may become a paradise of the King. It is because we already have so much of the kingdom that we work so hard.

*This Pamphlet
10 cts. the copy,
of the writer.*

[Faint, illegible handwriting]





